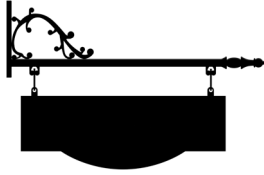


3



Alicia gasped and stepped forward, pushing the others aside.

“Officer, Danielle told me she rented a car this morning.” Her face was pale, and Jillian hurried to her side.

“Are you all right?” Jillian touched her coat sleeve gently.

“Yes, thank you.” Alicia’s contorted features said otherwise.

Rick took out his notepad and looked toward Jillian apologetically. “I only stopped in because you were on my way to the scene.”

Jillian understood. He didn’t want to be delayed here and probably wished he had simply phoned her, rather than coming here and upsetting all the guests. But then, he might not have gleaned this bit of information.

He shifted his gaze to Alicia, who was tall, blond, and had flawless skin. She would have made a perfect cheerleader back in the day, Jillian thought.

“Your name?” Rick asked.

“Alicia Boyken.”

“Could you tell me exactly what she said, please?”

“She called me this morning, before she left Boxborough. She said she had to get a rental car, and then she was going to take her daughter someplace. Then she’d head up here. But she was sure she’d get here before five o’clock.”

“And you haven’t heard from her since?”

“No, none of us have, and we’ve tried.”

Rick scribbled notes as she talked. “Do you know what company she rented the car from?”

“No. I don’t think she’d set it up yet when I talked to her.”

“What time was that?”

Alicia frowned, fingering the end of her golden braid. “Nine-thirty? Ten, maybe.”

“All right, thanks. Our department has traced the plate number, and it’s my understanding that the car in question was rented in Massachusetts. But the officer on the scene hadn’t found the driver or the rental agreement when he called it in. A resident reported the accident after she found the abandoned car, but there was no sign of the driver. Did Ms. Redding say why she had to get a rental?”

“No, I don’t think she did,” Alicia said. “I assumed her car was out of order.”

“Okay. This is helpful. You’ll be here all night, Ms. Boyken?” Rick asked.

“Yes. We all will be.” Alicia waved vaguely at the other six women in her group. She gave Rick her cell phone number.

“Can anyone else add anything to that?” He looked around at all of them. “Anybody else talk to Ms. Redding today?”

Emma Glidden stepped forward. “Several of us sent her texts and tried to phone her, but she didn’t answer any of them.”

“All right, I’ll get going.”

Jillian nodded. “Thanks, Rick. We’ll be waiting for news.”

Kate, who still sat on the stool behind the desk, threw Rick a bleak look as he hurried out the door.

“I don’t think I can sleep, not knowing what’s happened to her,” said a woman with long, frizzy brown hair.

Jillian forced a smile. “Maybe you ladies would like to move into the living room.”

“Sure,” Kate said. “We can bring you some coffee or—or—”

“Hot cider,” Jillian said quickly.

“That sounds wonderful,” said Gwen Vale, a woman with a slight build whose auburn hair helped Jillian remember that she was staying in the Copperfield room.

Kate helped her fix the hot drinks and carry trays to the living room. They had lit a fire in the fieldstone fireplace, and several of the women pulled their chairs close to the blaze, but the mood remained somber.

“I hope she’s all right and doesn’t have trouble with sugar,” said Bobbi Talbot, the woman whose long hair bushed out around her shoulders. “You don’t want to mess with that.”

Jillian stopped in front of her with the coffee tray. “What do you mean?”

Bobbi reached for a mug of coffee and a sweetener packet. “Thanks. Alicia was just saying that Danielle has blood sugar troubles.”

“That’s right, she’s a type one diabetic.” Worry lines creased Emma’s forehead. “I’d forgotten that. She always took insulin and her monitor to the away games in case she had an incident.”

“I remember that. She was always pricking her fingers,” dark-haired Heather Saxon said. Jillian had pegged her as the group’s troublemaker. She had complained about her room until Emma switched with her, and she seemed inclined to whine a little when the spotlight veered off her.

“Well, it’s necessary,” Alicia said. “Type 1 diabetes is when

your body doesn't produce enough insulin, so Danielle used that monitor to tell her when blood sugar levels were too high."

"Do you know if she wore a medical alert bracelet or pendant?" Jillian asked.

"I'm not sure," Alicia said. Now she and Emma both looked worried.

"I just wish she'd get here so we can do all the things we had planned," Heather muttered.

Silence fell over the group. After a few seconds, Heather apparently noticed the strained quiet.

"Not that I want her to be sick," she said hastily. "I hope she's okay, and she gets here and has fun with us, that's all."

Jillian took a few steps to the next pair of seated women. "Would you like coffee or cider, Bobbi? Gwen?"

"Thanks." Bobbi took a coffee mug from her tray.

"I'll have the cider," Gwen said with a smile. "It's clever of you to learn all our names so fast, Jillian."

"She's a teacher. They're born with that talent," Emma said, and they all chuckled.

Patrice Flynn passed on a hot beverage and stood. "I'm going up to my room and call home. This whole thing makes me want to touch base with Ned and the kids."

"Me too." Rachel Barker, a beauty with a dark complexion and midnight eyes, pulled out her phone and got to her feet. She was the shortest of the cheerleaders, and earlier the others had teased her about always being the one at the top of the pyramid. "I'm going to call Tom."

"Are you coming back?" Heather asked.

"I don't think so. Good night."

The others called good night to Rachel and Patrice and sipped their drinks, talking in low tones. One by one, they trailed off to their rooms.

“Well, I guess we don’t have to worry about them keeping the other guests awake,” Kate said to Jillian as the last two went up the stairs.

“Yeah.” Jillian let out a deep sigh. “I’m exhausted. And worried.”

“Me too.” Kate went over to the stool behind the front desk. “Why don’t you go next door and get to bed? I’ll wait for Andy.”

Andy Cummings was their weekend night clerk. Jillian wished suddenly that Don was scheduled for tonight. At two hundred twenty-five pounds and six feet tall, Don looked solid and no-nonsense. Andy, on the other hand, was a long-haired twenty-year-old student, slender and bookish. Not that she expected any trouble, but Jillian felt uneasy with the turn events had taken.

“Okay. I’ll check the downstairs windows and go out the back. Zeb mentioned those antique thefts this morning. We want to make sure we lock up tight every night.”

She went through the dining room first, checking the slide lock on each window, then into the living room. Her phone rang, and she yanked it from her pocket. “Rick,” she said after a glance at the screen. “What have you found out?”

“Hi, Jill. The rental car was involved in a one-car accident. It was severe enough to deploy the airbags, but the driver has apparently left the scene. The sheriff’s department hasn’t found him or her yet.”

“You mean ...”

“Nobody’s in the car or nearby. It’s in an isolated spot, on Heston Mills Road. We’re looking for the driver now.”

Jillian swallowed hard. “Is it Danielle’s rental?”

“I don’t know for sure yet. We haven’t been able to get through to the company.”

“What would she be doing out there? It’s not on her route from the highway to here.”

“Don’t know that either,” Rick said. “The sheriff’s sending more men out to search for the driver. We’ll look along the road, but it’s possible they were picked up by a passerby.”

“Or carjacked by an axe murderer.”

“Let’s not get dramatic.”

“Easy for you to say.” Jillian drew in a breath. “Rick, I’m worried about Danielle. We all are.”

“I know. We’re trying to borrow a K-9 unit. We’ve got the name of the rental company that owns the car. This is between you and me, but they have a branch in Boxborough, where Danielle is from. I’m not sure this car was rented there, though. I tried to call them, but they don’t open until eight in the morning, so I’ll call them then.”

“Don’t they have a twenty-four-hour number?”

“We’re working on that. So far we haven’t reached anyone who can help us.”

“Okay, did you find anything else?”

“I shouldn’t discuss that, Jill.”

“Oh, come on. We’ve got seven women going nuts on us here.” Jillian believed in logic and reason, but she wasn’t above a little exaggeration to get information out of her little brother.

Rick sighed. “You can’t tell them I found a cell phone in the car.”

“Is it Danielle’s?”

“I don’t know yet. We want to check for fingerprints before we do anything else.”

“Okay, that’s good.” Jillian’s mind raced. If Danielle had met with foul play, someone else might have touched her cell phone.

“After we do that, we’ll see if we can unlock it and check the contacts and recent calls and texts.”

“Oh, yeah.” She hadn’t thought about the phone having security measures. “What if you can’t?”

“Then we can’t. So this could take a while,” Rick said. “We’re having the car towed to the police garage.”

“Not the county sheriff’s?”

“We’re closer, and they’re happy to have us take this one, since it could involve a serious injury. I’ll let you know what progress we make in the morning.”

“Thanks.”

“No prob.”

“Oh, Rick, wait a minute!”

“What?” His impatient tone was obvious.

“One of the guests told us a few minutes ago that Danielle Redding is diabetic.”

“So that would explain the glucose monitor and insulin supply we found in the suitcase.”

“There was a suitcase?” Jillian almost yelled.

“Yeah. In the trunk. No luggage tag, though. Look, Jill, we don’t know it was her, okay? You can’t tell those women about it until we know something solid.”

“All right. Thanks, Rick.”

Jillian put her phone to sleep and went to the lobby to fill Kate in. To her surprise, she heard voices overhead when she passed through the dining room. Apparently some of the cheerleaders had stopped in the game room just above and were continuing their conversation there.

“I thought they were going to bed.”

“I guess some of them changed their minds.” Kate yawned and rested her elbow on the desk and her chin on her hand.

“Yeah. Well, Rick just called.”

Kate’s spine straightened. “What did he say?”

“They found a phone and a suitcase in the car, but they still don’t know for sure if they’re Danielle’s.”

“You’re kidding. I wish I could see that suitcase.”

“Me too.” Jillian decided that promising not to tell the guests was not the same as promising not to tell her sister. “Get this—they found a glucose monitor in the suitcase.”

Kate’s mouth opened in a silent scream. She leaned forward and whispered, “You heard what they said. Danielle is a type one diabetic.”

“I told Rick.”

“They’ve got to find that woman,” Kate said.

“Well, he’s aware now. But he said we can’t tell the others until they know for sure it’s her stuff.”

“What do they want? It’s got to be her.”

“They’re checking the phone for prints, and they may have to ask the phone company to help them unlock it.”

“Oh, boy.” Kate shook her head. “Well, on a lighter note, Dr. Englebrite called me today.”

“Your old boss? What did he want?”

“He begged me to come back to work for him.”

Jillian laughed. “I’ll bet he can’t find his stethoscope without you.”

“He’s not that bad. At least I didn’t think he was. He said the last month has been chaos for him and his partners.”

“Aw, come on. They haven’t found a new receptionist yet?”

“Apparently not one they like,” Kate said. “Don’t worry. I have no desire to go back to the medical practice.”

“Good to know.” Jillian thought she might be able to sleep now.

Lights swept over the wall.

“That must be Andy,” Kate said, walking to the door.

He came in a moment later. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail, almost as long as Alicia Boyken’s French braid. He slapped a thick medieval poetry book down on the desk and smiled at Jillian.

“Hi, Mrs. T.”

“Hi, Andy. I thought you were done for the semester.”

“Summer class.”

“Oh, okay. Looks interesting. Listen, we expect a late guest, so please be watching for her.”

“It’s a Mrs. Redding, and we’ve given her the Anna Karenina Room,” Kate said. “That’s so you don’t have to take her luggage upstairs and disturb the rest of the guests.”

“When’s she coming?” Andy asked.

Kate made a face. “She was supposed to be here earlier, but she hasn’t shown up yet.”

“That’s right,” Jillian said. “We think she may have been involved in a fender-bender, but she could show up anytime. And if she does arrive, please call my cell. We’re a little worried about her, and we want to know the minute she gets here.”

“Will do.” Andy took Kate’s place behind the desk and sat on the stool.

“So, we have a lot of guests,” Kate said with deceptive cheerfulness. “If anyone needs anything, it’s up to you to see to it.”

“Of course.”

“Unless it’s a major thing,” Jillian said quickly. “Then you call us. You know the drill.”

“Right.”

It was only Andy’s third weekend with the inn, and she still felt a little hesitant, leaving him in charge all night, especially with ten guests in the building and another expected.

A burst of laughter sounded from upstairs but was quickly quelled.

Jillian wondered if she ought to speak to the women, but she hated to do that. She was glad they weren’t being maudlin with so little information, and she hated to play the bad guy.

Kate ducked into the office and came out with Jillian’s

clipboard and her tote bag. As the volume of the voices overhead increased, the desk phone rang.

Andy pushed a button and picked it up. "Front desk, this is Andy. Uh-huh. Sure. We'll take care of it."

He hung up and shrugged. "The guy in Room 3 is complaining about the noise. Should I go tell them to keep it down?"

Jillian sighed. "I'll go. It's the cheerleading squad. I thought they'd quieted down for the night. Maybe they can move it into one of the back bedrooms if they still want to talk."

She handed Kate the clipboard and climbed the stairs. She had nearly reached the second floor landing when the conversation became clear.

"I'm sure Danielle will be all right," one of the women said.

"Yeah, she'll probably be here in the morning with a story to tell," said another.

Jillian took another step upward. She could see four of the women now, huddled in the comfortable chairs near the bookshelves.

"Well, she's ruining our weekend," Heather Saxon said. "It would serve Danielle right if something happened to her."